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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000447

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STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/04/2013

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: SUCCESSION ISSUES

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez. Reason: 1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: There are no laws or rules governing succession within the SPDC in Burma. Nevertheless, Than Shwe, Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt have begun to line up successors, including in particular Lieutenant Generals Thura Shwe Mann, Soe Win and Tin Aung Myint Oo. These are the three youngest members of the SPDC but apparently they already enjoy more of Than Shwe's confidence than any of the other officers on the Council. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The recent illness of the SPDC's No. 2, General Maung Aye, has focussed attention on how the SPDC will deal with a vacancy in one of its top three spots. It has only dealt with such a problem once -- in 1993, when a mentally ill General Saw Maung was bumped aside in favor of his Deputy Than Shwe. Since then the SPDC has twice purged lower ranking members of the council (in 1997 and 2001), and replaced Secretary 2 Tin Oo, who was killed in a helicopter crash, but has never touched the senior triumvirate of Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Khin Nyunt.

¶3. (C) There are reasons for this. Most obviously, there is no law nor any rules governing succession at the top. Senior General Than Shwe, as Commander in Chief of Defense Services and Prime Minister, can relieve or retire anyone below him in either the military or the government; no one can touch him, however. There are no fixed terms of office, fixed retirement ages, or periodic votes within the SPDC regarding its own leadership. So long as Than Shwe is able and willing to serve, and to serve in partnership with Maung Aye and Secretary 1 Khin Nyunt, all three will stay.

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The SPDC

¶4. (C) Secondly, there is now a huge gap between the top three and all the other members of the SPDC. In that regard, the SPDC is a very different animal from its predecessor, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). SLORC was a college of near equal viceroys, with most members having not only seats on the council, but also individual ministerial portfolios and/or regional military commands. In contrast, the 10 that now serve with the top 3 on the SPDC have little independent power or authority. They include a chief of staff (Thura Shwe Mann), four aging special operations commanders, and five staff positions (including the Adjutant General, the Quartermaster General, and DGs for military training, defense industries, and air defense). None of the 10, however, has any direct command of combat troops or direct authority in local affairs. Responsibilities in these areas are now largely left to the regional commanders, none of whom have seats on the SPDC. Similarly, none of the 10 hold any ministerial positions. While most of Burma's 32 ministries are still headed by active duty military officers, none of those ministers (with the exception of Prime Minister Than Shwe) sit on the SPDC.

¶5. (C) In short, in Burma now, we are not dealing with a gang of thirteen. We are dealing with a gang of three. With perhaps three exceptions, the other ten on the SPDC are there largely as padding to keep the regional military commanders at some distance from the centers of national authority. In one sense, this is simply insurance against a coup; in another, it is a natural separation of powers that effectively leaves only those at the very top in a position to direct the Army, the intelligence services and the government.

¶6. (C) It also leaves succession issues entirely in the hands of the top 3. With power now divided as it is, no one else in the SPDC, the government, or the regional commands is really in a position to influence that process. Than Shwe and company will serve as long as they want and will choose their own successors when they leave.

The Next Generation

¶7. (C) Right now, those designated successors appear to be the youngest members of the SPDC: Army Chief of Staff Thura Shwe Mann, the newly appointed Secretary 2 Soe Win, and, possibly, Quartermaster General Tin Aung Myint Oo. All three are Lieutenant Generals, but their Burmese Commission Numbers

(which indicate the dates of their commissions) and Defense Service Academy class numbers (11 and 12) suggest that all three entered the service years after their colleagues on the SPDC. Thura Shwe Mann, in particular, is both a favorite of Than Shwe and an officer with a distinguished combat record. He is also the fourth ranking member of the SPDC and the only member of the military other than Than Shwe and Maung Aye with a complete view of the Army's operations. Should Maung Aye die or step up into Than Shwe's position, then Thura Shwe Mann would likely take over as Commander in Chief of the Army. Soe Win similarly would likely take over as Secretary 1, if Khin Nyunt were to move up or step aside. He is the least known of the three, but served as rector at the University for the Development of National Races in the mid-1990s and may have a reputation for being able to work with the ethnic minorities. As for Quartermaster General Tin Aung Myint Oo, he simply seems to be a man with a future. He has been picked by Than Shwe to coordinate the government's response to the current banking crisis and could step up into more general responsibilities for the economy, if he's successful and the SPDC restructures to create an independent position with responsibilities for economic affairs. Right now, Maung Aye (the Chairman of the Trade Policy Committee) handles both economic and military affairs, while Khin Nyunt takes care of political issues.

Potential Problems

18. (C) This may all change as time goes on, of course. SPDC members have a way of disgracing themselves (as in the case of former Secretary 3 Win Myint) and there really is no reason to believe that the most recently designated successors will be any more immune to the temptations of power than their predecessors have been. Barring any such untoward events, however, the succession probably will run from Than Shwe to Maung Aye to Khin Nyunt, and then on to Thura Shwe Mann, Soe Win, and possibly Tin Aung Myint Oo.

19. (C) In fact, in the entire succession, there is probably only one tricky issue, which involves handling Khin Nyunt and the position of Army Commander in Chief, if and when Maung Aye moves up or out. As noted above, Lieutenant General Thura Shwe Mann is the logical choice to step in as Army Commander in Chief, when Maung Aye moves on. However, he can't command Khin Nyunt, who is now the Army's only full general. At the same time, Khin Nyunt would have trouble taking over as Army Commander in Chief himself, for two reasons. First, Khin Nyunt's specialty is military intelligence; he has never held a combat command. Secondly, he is an OTS graduate -- essentially the product of an ROTC program. While this is not necessarily a problem for officers seeking senior ranks in the Burmese Army (Than Shwe himself is an OTS graduate), it is enough, when taken in conjunction with his lack of combat command experience, to raise questions as to whether the Army would accept him as their Chief.

10. (C) This problem can be handled in a variety of ways, but our guess is that, when the time comes, the SPDC will simply split Maung Aye's current responsibilities, making Khin Nyunt Deputy Commander in Chief of Defense Services and No. 2 in the SPDC, while Thura Shwe Mann steps up to be Commander in Chief of the Army and No. 3 in the hierarchy. That would keep ranks in order within the SPDC while still allowing the Army to be commanded by a man with combat experience.

11. (C) In short, for all the risks that can surround any transition within a dictatorship, the SPDC's top three probably have the problem as well under control as could be expected. They've basically found the men they want to use and while there are potential problems out there, there are also potential solutions that will avoid pointless rivalries.

This will all have to be tested when the time comes, but for now, the system appears strong and flexible enough to survive the loss of any one of the three at the top.
Martinez